

‘Advocacy Philanthropy’ and the Public Policy Agenda:
The Role of Modern Foundations in American Higher Education

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**‘Advocacy Philanthropy’ and the Public Policy Agenda:
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Since their inception, philanthropic foundations have enjoyed a special relationship with higher education in the United States, recognizing investment in colleges and universities as an important way to achieve broader social influence. In one of the first scholarly works on foundations and their interactions with higher education, Hollis (1938) notes that “interested foundations have from the beginning desired to reform higher education in ways they believed would promote the general welfare” (pp. 116-117). A number of notable scholars in both philanthropy and education (Hollis, 1938; Curti & Nash, 1965; Hechinger, 1967; Weaver, 1967; Cheit & Lobman, 1979; Hammack, 1999; Proietto, 1999; Dowie, 2001; Bernstein, 2003; Bachetti & Ehrlich, 2007; Clotfelter, 2007) have documented this close and longstanding relationship; their work clearly shows that, historically, foundation influence on higher education has been exerted primarily through incentives to institutions directly.

In the early years of higher education philanthropy, foundations focused their grantmaking efforts on university infrastructure and capital building projects, as well as on academic research and other institutional and programmatic efforts (Curti & Nash 1965, Hammack 1999). In the twentieth century, philanthropies shifted their emphasis to improving and reforming existing colleges (Curti & Nash 1965). In this era, foundations were the driving force behind the creation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), the advancement of empirical social science and biological research, reforms in admission policies, the advent of a national faculty pension, the implementation of new technologies, and the development of interdisciplinary fields (Hammack 1999, Clotfelter 2007). As stated by Bacchetti (2007), “one does not have to read far in the small but illuminating literature about foundations and higher education to appreciate that many consequential shifts in higher education had their origins in foundation initiatives” (p. 255).

In contrast to the historical patterns, recent foundation behavior suggests that a new approach to higher education philanthropy has emerged over the past decade, one that emphasizes broad-scale reform initiatives and systemic change through focused, hands-on public policy work. In this paper, we examine the ways in which modern philanthropic foundations—namely, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation for Education, and other national foundations collaborating with them—may be pioneering a new political and public policy-oriented approach to philanthropy in American higher education. Terry Hartle, Senior Vice President for Government and Public Affairs at the American Council on Education (ACE), has called this set of foundation strategies “advocacy philanthropy” (Ashburn, 2010, Aug 8; Field, 2011, Jun 16). This paper addresses a void in our understanding of the relationships between foundations, higher education, and public policy and the changes that have occurred over the past decade.¹ Based on the evidence presented here, we argue that, although they are not the first philanthropic foundations to engage in advocacy and public policy grantmaking, modern foundations such as Lumina and Gates are defining what it means to be an influential higher education foundation in the twenty-first century.

A Context

On February 22, 2011, Hilary Pennington, former Director of Education, Postsecondary Success, and Special Initiatives at the Gates Foundation, announced the Completion Innovation Challenge, a competitive grant program administered by the Foundation and the nonprofit organization it helped establish in 2009, Complete College America. In an article she wrote for *Inside Higher Ed* publicizing the competition, Pennington stated:

Severe shortfalls have meant that in nearly every state and college system, budgets are being stretched and cut in ways that few have seen before. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation can’t fill those budget gaps, but we and our partners can spark the discussions and research

¹ The points defined by the philanthropy – university – state triangle may not be as distinct as we portray them in this paper. One might reasonably view universities (public and private) and foundations as an arm of the state. We do not take on this issue here. We thank Brian Pusser for raising this as an issue in an earlier draft.

necessary to help find the best way forward....The idea is to encourage state leaders to enact real change and lasting impact by helping them take on big ideas, like performance funding, revamping developmental education, and exploring new delivery models—even in these tough economic times. (Pennington, 2011, Feb 22, para. 2-3)

Out of 33 entries, the 10 states each receiving \$1 million in grant funding were: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Tennessee, Texas, and West Virginia (Complete College America, 2011). These winning states' proposals focused on issues such as remediation and developmental education, accelerated degree programs, learning assessments, transfer policies, adaptive advising, cohort support structures, customized computer instruction, and performance funding (Complete College America, 2011). In a recent entry on the Gates Foundation blog, Stan Jones, President of Complete College America, wrote that the two organizations “designed the competition to inspire states to make a real and lasting improvements on how their postsecondary systems operate....Governors also agreed to track success and college completion using new measures designed by Complete College America and the National Governors Association....There's no question that the Completion Innovation Challenge leveraged noble intentions to greater and deeper commitments for change” (Jones, 2011, para. 3-5).

The Completion Innovation Challenge grant program is illustrative of the sort of foundation-led efforts that have often dominated contemporary discussions of higher education policy issues. Citing the gravity of our postsecondary system's current situation—that not enough Americans are earning college degrees to fill the gaps both in terms of employment demands and tax revenues that will be left by the retiring Baby Boomer generation—major philanthropic foundations such as Gates and Lumina have pursued grantmaking agendas that are focused on strategic policy issues in higher education. Building on grant initiatives that began in the early 2000s, these philanthropies are seeking out opportunities to work closely with state governments, which historically have been the primary leverage point in higher education policy and planning but to date have been either unable or unwilling to amend the current patterns. These foundations are also

designing projects in collaboration with influential policy organizations such as the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP); governmental associations such as the National Governors Association (NGA) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL); corporations such as the College Board; and multiple entities at the federal level, most notably the Obama administration.

Recent public comments from foundation leaders have outlined this more proactive and, by some accounts, aggressive approach to philanthropy. In his keynote address at the 2010 Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) annual conference, Jamie Merisotis, President of the Lumina Foundation for Education, declared:

We've learned very quickly that Lumina is—and must be—more than just a grant-making organization. We increasingly recognize that, as an independent foundation pursuing a vital mission, we must also be a leadership organization....Yes, we follow the traditional but extremely important approach of identifying and supporting successful practices and meaningful research. But we also engage in public policy advocacy, and we use our communications and convening power to foster partnerships and to build public will for change. (Merisotis, 2010, Nov 19, para. 5)

In a similar set of remarks made during her 2008 speech at the Gates Foundation's "A Forum on Education in America," Pennington proclaimed:

We will use our voice—and encourage others to do the same—to raise awareness about the urgency of our goal and building support for the policy and financial commitments needed to achieve it....We will support research to identify the best policy approaches and the best institutional practices to accelerate completion, and we will leverage that information, sharing what we learn with key decision makers throughout the nation. Our foundation has a strong and persuasive voice, and we will join you in advocating for policy changes and investments proven to get results. (Pennington, 2008, Nov 11, para. 52, 56-57)

Throughout this paper, we argue that the focus on policy advocacy, partnerships, and public will for change emphasized in Merisotis's remarks, and the desire to leverage information and use a persuasive voice highlighted in Pennington's comments, reflect an important deviation from the traditional philanthropic approach to higher education. The evidence presented in this paper

suggests that these foundations' overt focus on public policy advocacy within specific state and local contexts will have a significant impact on higher education in the United States.

Research Question and Value of Study

In light of these observed trends, as well as the current financial and demographic challenges facing higher education, we set out to address the broad question: Are modern foundations pioneering a new approach to higher education philanthropy? In a recent article, Hartle was quoted as saying, "What we can say is that this is a brave new world....I think that Gates and a couple foundations, primarily Lumina, are pioneering a new approach that wouldn't have been used in the past" (Ashburn, 2010, Aug 8, 'Mammoth' Influence para. 4). Using evidence presented in the academic literature and public discourse material, we address whether this 'advocacy philanthropy' approach constitutes a shift in the relationship between philanthropy and higher education, and whether it is significant enough to constitute a 'brave new world.' We then take up the question: How might such an approach (which disrupts our current understanding of how philanthropy, government, and higher education interact) impact the future of our postsecondary system? In this way, we deal with the potential benefits, concerns, and developing consequences through the observations of the foundation leaders and policy experts we interviewed.

There exists a rich academic literature on foundations and higher education focusing on matters related to historical trends in philanthropic giving to higher education and the role of foundations in public life. As cited in the opening section of this paper, a number of scholars have argued that the close relationship between foundations and higher education; yet, their work has focused on the traditional model of foundations awarding grants directly to colleges and universities for institutional projects, programs, and reforms. In recent years, Bernstein (2003), Weisbuch (2007), and Bacchetti (2007) have all investigated whether philanthropic funding of higher education is in decline; their conclusions have been mixed, with some studies showing a waning in foundation

grantmaking and others illustrating little significant change in funding patterns. Additionally, several contemporary scholars (Dowie, 2001; Roelofs, 2003; Frumkin, 2006; Prewitt, 2006; Burkhardt, 2007; Fleishman, 2007; Lagemann & de Forest, 2007) have broadly traced the development of movements such as ‘strategic,’ ‘venture,’ and ‘transformational’ philanthropy and have commented on the position of foundations in society, from both favorable and critical perspectives. More specifically, McKersie (1999), Cohen (2007), Lenkowsky and Piereson (2007), and Jagpal (2009) have studied how ‘strategic philanthropy’ has been used by conservative foundations advocating for reforms to K-12 education.

This study differs from the current academic literature because it challenges traditional notions of how foundations, higher education, and public policy interact. Drawing on material from both popular and scholarly sources, the paper brings together the worlds of academic and policy research; its treatment of issues relating to higher education funding, governance, policy, and the public good allows for an open discussion of subjects that are salient for a variety of audiences.

Methods

This is a mixed methods study incorporating four primary sources of data and analyses: (1) a review of the academic literature, (2) a detailed analysis of the public discourse contained in a wide variety of media accounts, reports, speeches, and web material, related to the role that foundations are playing in higher education policy, planning, and reform activities, (3) 10 years of secondary data on aggregate philanthropic giving to higher education, as well as more foundation-specific data, and (4) interviews with five senior-level professionals in philanthropy and higher education policy.

The first three data sources allow us to triangulate the accounts in the academic literature, popular media sources, foundations, and the empirical data on giving over the past decade. Our secondary data on aggregate philanthropic giving to higher education come from the Foundation Center; the foundation-specific data were compiled through foundations’ records, grants databases,

annual reports, and websites. Through the literature review, the review of the public discourse, and the descriptive statistical analyses (trend analyses) using the secondary data on giving, we were able to specify a series of working hypotheses about substantive shifts in the orientations of the mega-foundations to higher education and the state and federal policy domains.

We then used these working hypotheses as a set of discussion points in a series of confidential, semi-structured interviews with two senior-level professionals currently working at major philanthropic organizations and three senior-level professionals currently working in highly active and visible higher education policy and consultancy organizations. Participants were identified based on their knowledge and expertise in higher education funding, policy, and planning. Each participant was provided with a written summary of our work, our observations, and our hypotheses and was asked to engage in a 45-minute interview. While our working hypotheses guided the conversation, the questions were intentionally open-ended, leaving room for clarification and further development by both interviewer and interviewee.

Results

The data we gleaned through the steps above illustrate several trends that are relevant to our broad research question. These trends help fill in a context for how the ‘advocacy philanthropy’ approach to higher education has developed and gained strength over the past decade.

Working Hypotheses

(1) Since 2000, there have been fewer, larger players in the philanthropic community for higher education; the emergence of Gates and Lumina as ‘megafoundations’ was a significant development during this time period.

In the last decade, philanthropic foundations’ investment in higher education has remained remarkably strong. Table 1 lists the total number and amount of grants made by the top 50 foundations contributing to higher education each year between 2000 and 2009. The data show some peaks and valleys, which are consistent with the state of the economy over the time period

captured; notably, there was a significant drop-off in the total amount of grants in 2007, and the decline has continued through 2009, the most recent year available.

Table 1. *Higher Education Top 50 Foundations Total Giving, circa 2000-2009*

Year	Number of Grants	Total Amount of Grants
2000	4,442	\$2,021,042,507
2001	4,796	\$2,409,885,289
2002	4,384	\$2,241,314,128
2003	4,806	\$1,567,408,061
2004	4,197	\$1,592,835,304
2005	4,208	\$2,104,190,890
2006	3,950	\$2,086,961,509
2007	1,773	\$1,142,099,520
2008	2,040	\$1,246,869,376
2009	2,322	\$1,037,006,626

Notes: Top 50 foundations specific to higher education subject area and adjusted for giving amounts each year; statistics based on grants of \$10,000 or more awarded by a national sample of over 1,000 larger U.S. foundations. (The Foundation Center, 2011)

Looking within the field of education philanthropy, Table 2 shows the dollar value percentages of foundation giving to various education subject areas from 2000 to 2009. The data indicate that giving in each area has been relatively steady, with a higher education garnering the largest percentage of education grant dollars in all but one year—in 2003, higher education was surpassed by elementary and secondary education by nearly one percentage point.

Table 2. *Change in Distribution of Foundation Grants for Education by Subject, circa 2000-2009*

Subject	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Policy, Management and Information	0.1	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.2	0.4
Elementary and Secondary	8.0	7.2	7.4	8.6	6.8	7.2	7.1	7.0	6.7	6.4
Vocational and Technical	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Higher Education	8.8	10.9	9.1	7.8	9.3	9.6	8.6	9.6	9.4	8.8
Graduate and Professional	4.3	5.1	5.2	3.5	3.0	3.3	2.3	2.7	2.6	3.4
Adult and Continuing	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.3
Library Science/ Libraries	1.8	1.4	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.0	1.3	0.9	0.9	0.8

Student Services	0.6	0.6	1.5	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.5
Educational Services	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.8	1.6	1.6	1.7	1.4	1.3	2.7
Total Education	25.2	26.8	26.4	24.5	23.4	24.0	22.5	22.8	21.8	23.3

Notes: Dollar figures in thousands. Based on all grants of \$10,000 or more awarded by a national sample of over 1,000 larger U.S. foundations each year. (The Foundation Center, 2011)

Behind this strong tradition of giving to higher education is a group of foundations that has emerged as the most prominent in terms of funding postsecondary initiatives during the past decade. The names of the most active foundations are listed in Table 3, based on the number of years they were named as one of the Foundation Center’s top 25 higher education funders between the years 2000 and 2009; only those foundations that appeared seven times or more are listed in the table.

Table 3. *Foundations Giving Prominently to Higher Education, circa 2000-2009*

Foundation Name	Location	Years in Top 25
Alfred P. Sloan Foundation	NY	7: 2000-2006
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The	NY	10: 2000-2009
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	WA	10: 2000-2009
Carnegie Corporation of New York	NY	7: 2002, 2004-2009
Duke Endowment, The	NC	10: 2000-2009
Ford Foundation, The	NY	7: 2000-2006
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation	IL	7: 2000-2006
Kresge Foundation, The	MI	8: 2000-2004; 2007-2009
Lilly Endowment Inc.	IN	10: 2000-2009
Lumina Foundation for Education, Inc.	IN	7: 2003-2009
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The	NJ	7: 2000-2006
Starr Foundation, The	NY	7: 2000-2004; 2006-2007
W.K. Kellogg Foundation	MI	7: 2000-2006
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, The	CA	8: 2000-2007

Note: Based on foundation being in top 25 of funders at least seven times between 2000 and 2009. (The Foundation Center, 2011)

Although many of these foundations were consistently generous givers to higher education over the entire time period, narrowing the field and then comparing the first half of the decade with the second half of the decade shows some fairly significant differences, both in the names of the foundations and the number present. Table 4 lists the nine most active foundations between 2000 and 2004, based on their repeated presence in the Foundation Center’s top 10 higher education

funders; only those that appeared three times or more are included. Likewise, Table 5 lists the five most active foundations between 2005 and 2009, based on their repeated presence in the Foundation Center’s top 10 higher education funders; only those that appeared three times or more are included.

Table 4. *Top Higher Education Funders, circa 2000-2004*

Foundation Name	Location	Years in Top 10
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The	NY	5: 2000-2004
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	WA	5: 2000-2004
Duke Endowment, The	NC	3: 2000, 2003-2004
Ford Foundation, The	NY	5: 2000-2004
Freeman Foundation, The	NY	3: 2002-2004
Lilly Endowment Inc.	IN	5: 2000-2004
Pew Charitable Trusts, The	PA	4: 2000-2003
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The	NJ	5: 2000-2004
Whitaker Foundation, The	VA	3: 2000-2002

Note: Based on foundation being in top 10 of funders at least three times between 2000 and 2004. (The Foundation Center, 2011)

Table 5. *Top Higher Education Funders, circa 2005-2009*

Foundation Name	Location	Years in Top 10
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The	NY	5: 2005-2009
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	WA	5: 2005-2009
Duke Endowment, The	NC	3: 2005-2007
Lilly Endowment Inc.	IN	5: 2005-2009
Lumina Foundation for Education, Inc.	IN	3: 2005, 2008-2009

Notes: Based on foundation being in top 10 of funders at least three times between 2005 and 2009. (The Foundation Center, 2011)

In the first half of the decade, there are nine foundations that met the defined criteria; interestingly, three of these funders—The Freeman Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and The Whitaker Foundation—do not even appear on the more general ‘prominent’ funders list; in other words, early in the decade they were in the top 10 at least three times, but over the course of the decade they were in the top 25 fewer than seven. In the latter half of the decade, however, there are only five foundations that met the defined criteria; four of these are also found on the list from

earlier in the decade, and one, the Lumina Foundation for Education, is new to the top higher education funders list.

Based on the changes in the prominent funders of higher education over the decade 2000-2009, as presented in Tables 3-5, we investigated the websites, grants databases, and public announcements made by these foundations. Generally speaking, we observed the following: the foundations that moved away from, or significantly reduced their investment in, higher education during the past decade included The Pew Charitable Trusts and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Foundations that, over the decade, stuck with a more historical or traditional model of funding higher education institutions and research included The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Duke Endowment, and the Lilly Endowment. Foundations that continued to fund higher education over the decade but altered the issues that they funded and/or their grantmaking strategies included the Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Ford Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation—while these foundations have been major players in higher education, their current philanthropy aligns with a more modern approach to higher education (i.e., a more strategic, policy-focused approach that emphasizes broad-scale higher education issues such as completion, productivity, and technology). Finally, the new megafoundations in higher education, both in terms of financial resources and influence, are the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Higher Education. While the Gates Foundation was a top funder over the entire decade, it only recently took up postsecondary education as a primary issue. The foundations we were unable to categorize were the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, The Freeman Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Starr Foundation, and The Whitaker Foundation. In these cases, it was too difficult to assess whether these philanthropies' reduction in funding to higher education in the latter half of the 2000-2009 decade was a strategic move or simply the product of these foundations' current economic situation;

many of them have continued to fund higher education as part of their overall grantmaking portfolio, but their funding dropped off notably sometime between 2005 and 2007.

(2) There has been a shift in the focus of foundations toward issues of completion, productivity, metrics, and efficiency—foundations are focusing on broad policy issues, including the ways in which higher education systems are arranged, their funding structures, how they are held accountable, and how they manage their data systems. Several factors have aided in this consumer-driven focus, including the economic imperative for more Americans earning a postsecondary degree, the need for external pressure and a larger scale, the vacuum created by state fiscal distress, and the rise of what the Lumina Foundation calls the “21st century student.”

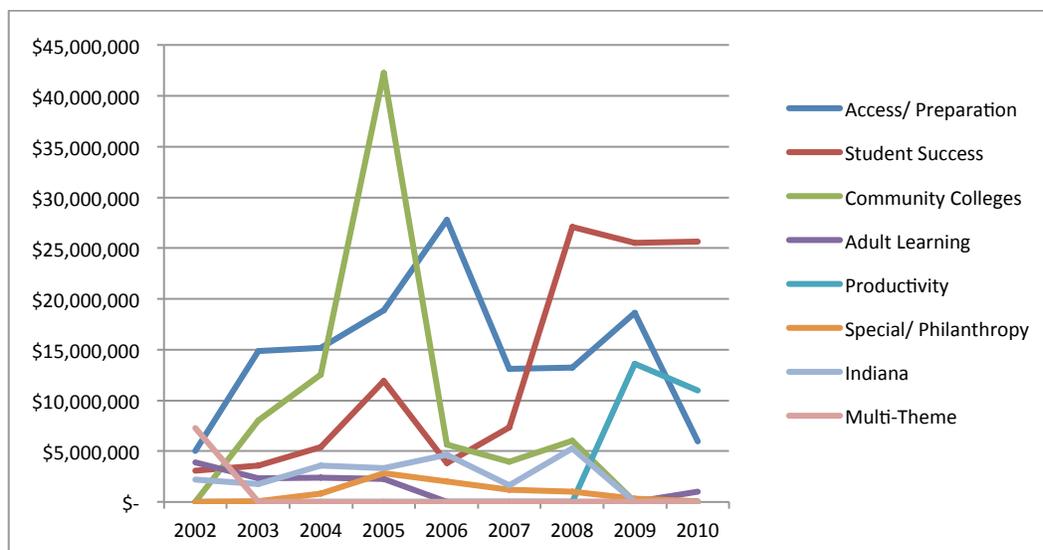
To illustrate the point that foundation priorities have changed over the most recent decade, Table 6 and Figure 1 show the change in total value of the Lumina Foundation’s investments, by year, based on the following grant categories: Access/Preparation, Student Success, Community Colleges, Adult Learning, Productivity, Special/Philanthropy, Indiana, and Multi-Theme.

Table 6. *Total Value of Lumina Foundation Grants, by Category, 2002-2010*

Year	Access/ Prep.	Student Success	Community Colleges	Adult Learning	Productivity	Special/ Philanthropy	Indiana	Multi- Theme
2002	\$5,005,800	\$3,075,100	\$0	\$3,895,500	\$0	\$0	\$2,233,850	\$7,259,634
2003	\$14,866,690	\$3,584,225	\$ 8,022,500	\$2,342,030	\$0	\$75,000	\$1,774,300	\$0
2004	\$15,167,575	\$5,411,990	\$12,531,800	\$2,380,500	\$0	\$828,100	\$3,572,200	\$0
2005	18,852,763	\$11,943,362	\$42,248,259	\$2,237,721	\$0	\$2,828,700	\$3,359,500	\$0
2006	\$27,785,150	\$3,834,230	\$5,654,500	\$0	\$0	\$2,023,500	\$4,627,200	\$0
2007	\$13,107,300	\$7,344,600	\$3,932,072	\$0	\$0	\$1,175,000	\$1,655,400	\$0
2008	\$13,206,150	\$27,097,800	\$6,047,200	\$0	\$0	\$1,000,000	\$5,267,200	\$0
2009	\$18,634,300	\$25,543,238	\$0	\$0	\$13,585,200	\$306,800	\$0	\$0
2010	\$5,939,616	\$25,654,300	\$0	\$1,000,000	\$10,949,000	\$85,000	\$0	\$0

Note: Annual report for 2010 not available at the original writing of this paper; 2010 grant data were taken from quarterly press releases about grants approved. (Lumina Foundation, 2009 & 2010)

Figure 1. *Total Value of Lumina Foundation Grants, by Category, 2002-2010*



Note: Annual report for 2010 not available at the original writing of this paper; 2010 grant data were taken from quarterly press releases about grants approved. (Lumina Foundation, 2009 & 2010)

The data demonstrate a decline in access/preparation grants made by the Lumina Foundation, an increase in student success grants, a peak in community colleges grants in 2005 (which is associated with the trajectory of Lumina’s Achieving the Dream initiative), a new interest in productivity grants, and declines (or perhaps a re-categorization of grants) in the areas of adult learning, special/philanthropy, Indiana, and multi-theme.

In a similar vein, Table 7 and Figure 2 illustrate the change in total value of the Gates Foundation’s investment in its United States program initiatives, per year, based on the following grant categories: College-Ready Education, Postsecondary Education, Scholarships, Advocacy & Public Policy, and Research & Development.

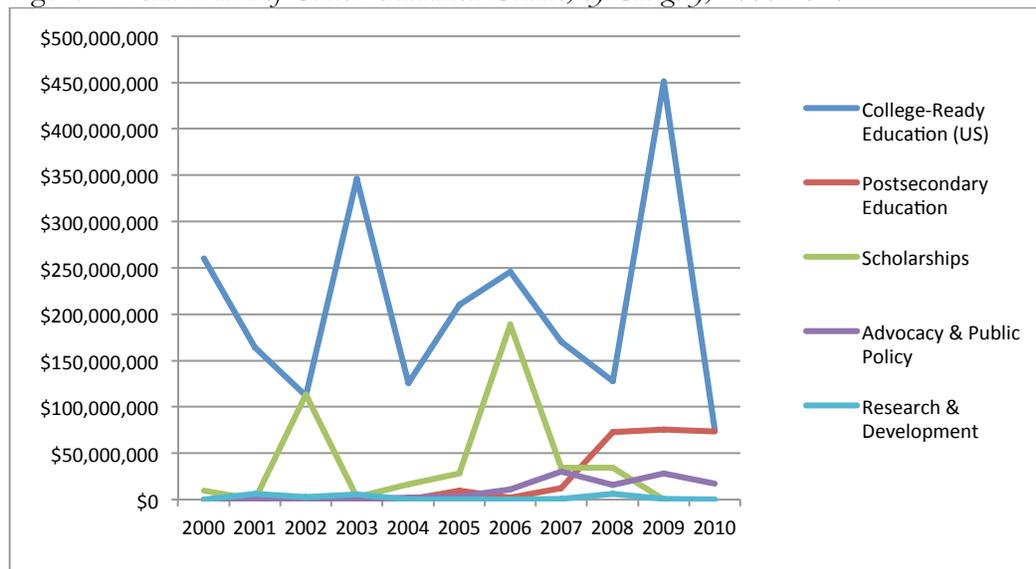
Table 7. Total Value of Gates Foundation Grants, by Category, 2000-2010

Year	College-Ready Education	Postsecondary Education	Scholarships	Advocacy & Public Policy	Research & Development
2000	\$260,462,858	\$0	\$9,519,690	\$0	\$135,000
2001	\$164,449,947	\$0	\$132,200	\$0	\$6,347,198
2002	\$111,663,823	\$0	\$113,394,335	\$0	\$2,554,720
2003	\$345,918,513	\$0	\$2,596,919	\$700,000	\$5,767,076
2004	\$125,432,925	\$0	\$16,605,647	\$1,992,452	\$0
2005	\$210,006,500	\$9,997,047	\$28,389,290	\$3,628,631	\$0
2006	\$245,926,511	\$2,400,000	\$188,703,921	\$10,781,170	\$0

2007	\$170,255,432	\$12,190,060	\$34,092,892	\$30,304,958	\$549,309
2008	\$127,541,882	\$73,045,712	\$34,678,531	\$15,945,269	\$6,000,000
2009	\$450,942,666	\$75,580,874	\$0	\$28,395,182	\$400,000
2010	\$75,467,778	\$73,335,109	\$0	\$17,013,145	\$0

Note: Data collected from Gates Foundation online grant database in February 2011; grants reflect the primary category assigned at that time. (Gates Foundation, 2011, Feb 6)

Figure 2. Total Value of Gates Foundation Grants, by Category, 2000-2010



Note: Data collected from Gates Foundation online grant database in February 2011; grants reflect the primary category assigned at that time. (Gates Foundation, 2011, Feb 6)

The data show that, overall, college-ready education has been the largest funding priority for the Gates Foundation, although the value of its support has varied widely per year. Postsecondary education funding jumped up significantly in 2008 and has held steady; advocacy and public policy spending is up-and-down, and scholarship funding, while also varying widely, has declined significantly since 2006. In 2010, funding for college-ready education and postsecondary education were nearly even.

While there remains a wide range of issues in higher education, a handful of subjects have emerged as the most prominent and pressing issues during the past several years. Of these, college completion has experienced the strongest push from the philanthropic sector, with a number of foundations making the goal of raising college completion rates the core of their postsecondary grantmaking missions. Several higher education journalists have emphasized the leading role that

philanthropic foundations have played in driving the college completion agenda. While the President’s announcement of the American Graduation Initiative in 2009 may have given the college completion issue more legitimacy, his was certainly not a lone voice. Reporting on the 2010 ASHE conference, Lederman (2010, Nov 22) declared that “the convergence around the ‘college completion agenda’...has been driven by many factors, most notably the imprimatur of President Obama within the first weeks of his term. But arguably even more important has been the fact that the country’s highest-profile foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the most visible foundation focused primarily on higher education, the Lumina Foundation for Education, have both thrust college completion to the top of their agendas” (para. 2).

With this idea in mind, Table 8 lists the college completion-oriented initiatives and organizations that have emerged during the past decade, along with the major funders for each initiative and the year it was announced.

Table 8. *Foundation-Funded College Completion Initiatives*

Initiative/Organization Name	Major Funder(s)	Year
Access to Success (The Education Trust)	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education	2009
Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count	Lumina Foundation for Education (founding member); Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and several others	2004
Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence (The Aspen Institute)	Bank of America Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, JP Morgan Chase Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education	2010
California Competes (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors)	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, James Irvine Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	2011
Community Colleges Bridges to Opportunity	Ford Foundation	2003
Complete College America	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Ford Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, W.K. Kellogg Foundation	2009
Complete to Compete (National Governors Association)	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education	2010

Completion by Design	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	2010
Developmental Education Initiative	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education	2009
Ensuring America's Future by Increasing Latino College Completion (Excelencia in Education)	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Kresge Foundation	2010
National Coalition for College Completion (Institute for Higher Education Policy)	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education,	2011
Next Generation Learning Challenges (Educause)	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	2010
Pathways to Advancement	Lumina Foundation for Education	2003
Productivity Grantmaking (formerly Making Opportunity Affordable)	Lumina Foundation for Education	2009
Shifting Gears	The Joyce Foundation	2007
Talent Dividend Prize (CEOs for Cities)	The Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education	2011
Voluntary Framework of Accountability	Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation for Education	2010

Whether by launching movements themselves or heavily funding them through other organizations, the Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and several other major philanthropic foundations have been busily creating and promoting completion-related projects. As Merisotis indicated in a speech given in March 2009, “Today our Big Goal doesn’t seem so audacious. If we’re still out on a limb, we have some pretty good branch neighbors. The College Board and the State Higher Education Executive Officers have embraced goals similar to ours. And, three weeks ago, President Obama drew applause from both sides of the aisle when he pledged to Congress that America once again will have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (Merisotis, 2009, Mar 17, para. 9). This coalescence of mission has been viewed by some higher education policy experts as historic. Referring again to the ‘college completion agenda,’ Lederman (2009, Jul 20) reported that “Paul E. Lingenfelter, president of the SHEEO group, compared the consensus that has emerged between federal and state policy makers as on par with other seminal moments when higher education has soared to the top of the national agenda, such as the passage of the

Morrill Act, the GI Bill, and the Higher Education Act of 1965” (Emerging Consensus para. 4).

Philanthropic foundations, which have not always partnered so closely with government leaders, are implicit in this consensus group.

Along with college completion, the issues of productivity, community college reform, and data and technology have been emphasized by foundations during the past decade. The motivation behind these grantmaking strategies stems from our nation’s economic circumstances and the changing demographics of our population. The Lumina Foundation in particular is making a strong case for the economic imperative of improving American higher education for a new population of students; its leaders contend that, “as the economic benefits of higher education attainment become more widely recognized, the public, business leaders, and higher education institutions are paying more attention to the impact that college completion can have on economic development. There is a growing consensus that new models are needed to expand knowledge and strategies to develop the human capital needed for today’s economy” (Lumina Foundation, 2011, Jun 7, para. 1).

(3) Over the past decade, there has been an increasing level of distrust that higher education institutions can successfully enact reforms that will result in meaningful changes to our postsecondary system; this distrust has led to an increasing reliance on internal foundation research and strategy teams and the funding of external and intermediary organizations, with philanthropies soliciting proposals from specific entities rather than the field at large—while some foundation money continues to go to specific higher education institutions, increasingly foundation grants are being awarded to systems of higher education, states, and policy organizations.

Looking at the years 2000-2009, Table 9 shows the institutions that have received a significant amount of philanthropic funding, based on their being in the top 10 recipients of higher education foundation grants at least five times. Unsurprisingly, those included on this list make up some of the most prestigious and wealthy research universities in the country; all of these institutions are private universities, save the University of California.

Table 9. *Top Recipients of Foundation Higher Education Grants, circa 2000-2009*

Institution Name	Location	Years in Top 10
Columbia University	NY	10: 2000-2009
Duke University	NC	8: 2000-2004, 2006-2007, 2009
Harvard University	MA	9: 2000-2008
Johns Hopkins University	MD	6: 2000-2004, 2009
Stanford University	CA	9: 2000-2001, 2003-2009
University of California	CA	7: 2000-2006
University of Pennsylvania	PA	7: 2000-2006

Note: Based on institution being in top 10 of recipients of higher education foundation grants at least five times between 2000 and 2009. (The Foundation Center, 2011)

In recent years, however, it has become more common for foundations to award higher education grants to non-institutional entities. Although the decade was still dominated by colleges and universities, as well as some scholarship and fellowship programs and organizations, from 2006-2009, there was a more diverse group of recipients. Table 10 offers a sample of intermediary higher education policy organizations that made it into the top 50 recipients of higher education grants.

Table 10. *Top Foundation-Funded Higher Education Policy Organizations, circa 2000-2009*

Organization Name	Location	Year in Top 50
College Board	NY	2006
Complete College America (formerly, the National Consortium for College Completion)	IN	2009
Gateway to College National Network	OR	2009
Institute for Higher Education Policy	DC	2009
Jobs for the Future	MA	2006
MDC	NC	2008

Note: Based on appearance in top 50 of recipients of higher education foundation grants between 2000 and 2009 as a higher education policy organization. (The Foundation Center, 2011)

The strengths of intermediary organizations include stability, depth in expertise, wide reach, dissemination of best practices, assessment, and delivery (Bacchetti, 2007; Weisbuch, 2007). It appears that contemporary foundations recognize these advantages and are increasingly making higher education grants to intermediary entities. Table 11 lists a sample of the most well-known policy organizations that have received substantial amounts of philanthropic funding in recent years. We have categorized these entities into four different types, based on their primary function: initiative-based nonprofit organizations, membership associations, project consultants and

contractors, and research and policy institutes. These higher education policy organizations take on a number of different roles in the foundation initiative and grantmaking process; they produce policy reports, conduct research projects, put on conferences and summits, and engage in various implementation activities such as providing consultations, setting up data systems, and writing and editing legislation. Policy organizations play an important role in adding the technical expertise, people connections, and overall legitimacy needed to advance and implement foundation strategies.

Table 11. *Sample of Policy Organizations Working in Higher Education*

Intermediary Type	Organization Name
Initiative-Based Nonprofits	Achieving the Dream Complete College America
Membership Associations	American Council on Education American Association of Community Colleges Council of Independent Colleges Education Commission of the States League for Innovation in the Community College Midwestern Higher Education Compact National Conference of State Legislatures National Governors Association State Higher Education Executive Officers Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education
Project Consultants and Contractors	EDUCAUSE HCM Strategists Jobs for the Future MDC MDRC National Center for Higher Education Management Systems Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisers
Research and Policy Institutes	The Aspen Institute Community College Research Center Delta Projects on Postsecondary Costs, Productivity, and Accountability Education Trust Excelencia in Education Gateway to College National Network The Institute for College Access and Success Institute for Higher Education Policy Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education

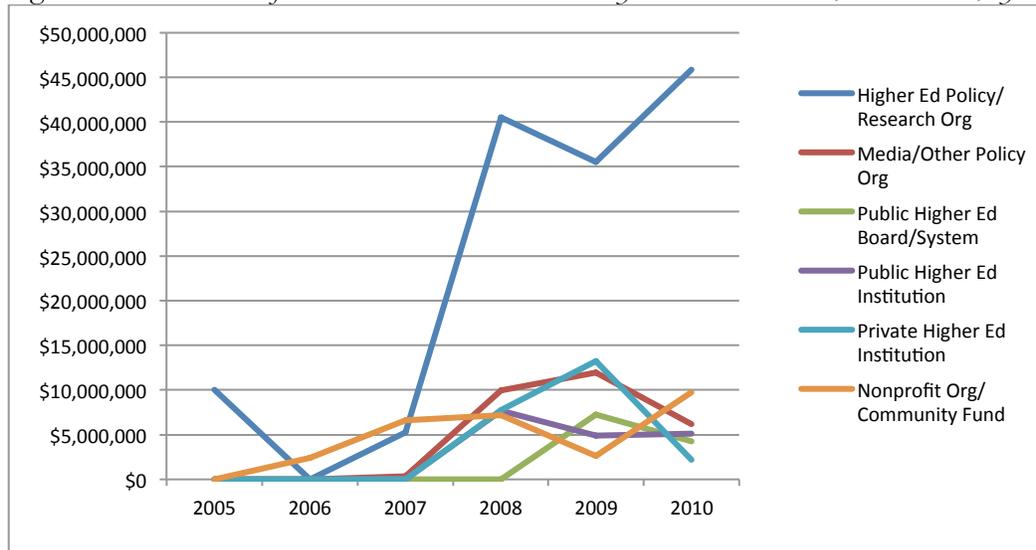
Table 12 and Figure 3 illustrate the recipients of Gates Foundation postsecondary education grants by the following grantee types: Higher Education Policy/Research Organization; Media Agency/Other Policy Organization; Public Higher Education Board/System; Public Higher Education Institution; Private Higher Education Institution, and Nonprofit Organization/Community Fund.

Table 12. *Total Value of Gates Foundation Postsecondary Education Grants, 2005-2010, by Grantee Type*

Year	Higher Ed Policy/Research Org	Media/Other Policy Org	Public Higher Ed Board/System	Public Higher Ed Institution	Private Higher Ed Institution	Nonprofit Org/Comm. Fund
2005	\$9,997,047	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
2006	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$2,400,000
2007	\$5,283,589	\$308,000	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$6,598,471
2008	\$40,504,087	\$9,931,139	\$0	\$7,651,785	\$7,752,982	\$7,205,719
2009	\$35,528,327	\$11,978,579	\$7,267,563	\$4,905,252	\$13,262,744	\$2,638,409
2010	\$45,873,484	\$6,153,553	\$4,294,044	\$5,098,921	\$2,183,143	\$9,731,964

(Gates Foundation, 2011)

Figure 3. *Total Value of Gates Foundation Postsecondary Education Grants, 2005-2010, by Grantee Type*



(Gates Foundation, 2011)

The data demonstrate a striking increase in Gates Foundation postsecondary grant funding made to higher education research and policy organizations. There is quite a bit of variation in the other categories; between 2007 and 2009, there were modest increases in grant dollars for media agencies and other policy organizations, public higher education boards and systems, and private higher

education institutions, however all three of these categories saw declines again in 2010. Both the public higher education institution category and the nonprofit organizations and community funds category remained relatively steady over the decade.

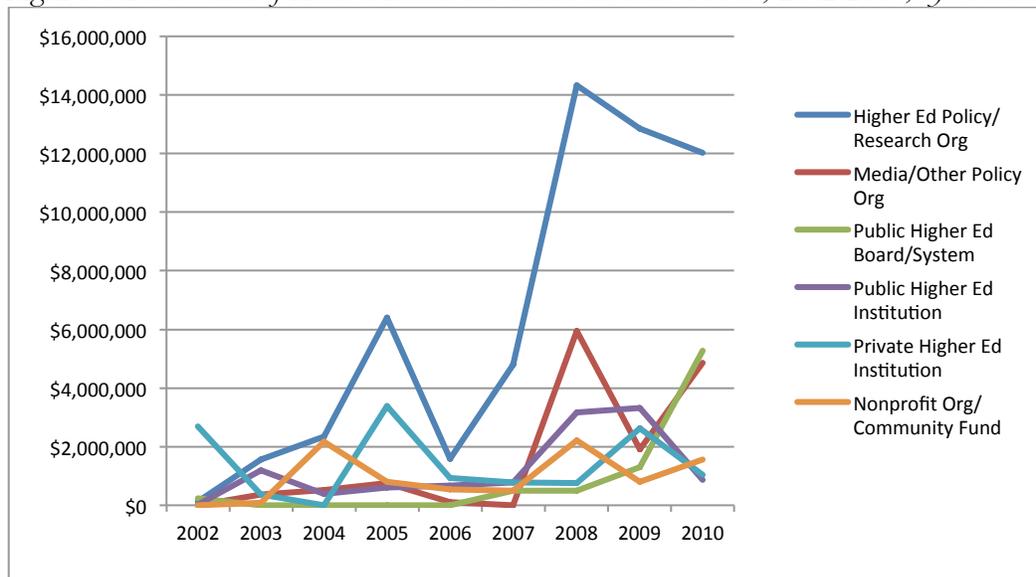
Likewise, Table 13 and Figure 4 show the recipients of Lumina Foundation student success grants by the following grantee types: Higher Education Policy/Research Organization; Media Agency/Other Policy Organization; Public Higher Education Board/System; Public Higher Education Institution; Private Higher Education Institution, and Nonprofit Organization/Community Fund.

Table 13. Total Value of Lumina Foundation Student Success Grants, 2002-2010, by Grantee Type

Year	Higher Ed Policy/Research Org	Media/Other Policy Org	Public Higher Ed Board/System	Public Higher Ed Institution	Private Higher Ed Institution	Nonprofit Org/Comm. Fund
2002	\$124,500	\$0	\$245,000	\$19,800	\$2,685,800	\$0
2003	\$1,560,700	\$375,500	\$0	\$1,202,400	\$370,625	\$75,000
2004	\$2,351,290	\$518,100	\$0	\$383,700	\$0	\$2,158,900
2005	\$6,407,002	\$750,000	\$0	\$606,800	\$3,381,100	\$798,460
2006	\$1,576,460	\$100,000	\$0	\$679,000	\$930,050	\$548,720
2007	\$4,795,800	\$0	\$500,000	\$775,200	\$774,200	\$499,400
2008	\$14,335,300	\$5,950,700	\$500,000	\$3,163,100	\$751,400	\$2,202,300
2009	\$12,844,800	\$1,912,100	\$1,300,000	\$3,312,750	\$2,617,700	\$800,000
2010	\$12,029,200	\$4,869,800	\$5,282,600	\$874,700	\$1,040,000	\$1,558,000

(Lumina Foundation, 2009 & 2010)

Figure 4. Total Value of Lumina Foundation Student Success Grants, 2002-2010, by Grantee Type



(Lumina Foundation, 2009 & 2010)

While the data show a clear increase in student success grants overall, there are also some other notable developments. Between 2006 and 2008, there was a sharp increase in foundation grant funding awarded to higher education policy and research organization, an amount that held relatively steady through 2010. In 2008, there was an increase in grant dollars for media agencies and other policy organizations, which dropped off a bit in 2009 but regained steam in 2010. Finally, between 2008 and 2010, there was an increase in grant funding made to public higher education boards or systems and a slight decrease in grant dollars for public institutions.

The above data illustrate how Lumina and Gates have deviated from the traditional pattern of making grants directly to higher education institutions. Rather, both foundations have identified states and state leaders as key partners in reform. Recently, Merisotis (2011, Jul 16) spoke directly to state policymakers at the National Governors Association's annual meeting. His speech highlighted how governors "can wield tremendous power in the reform effort" in their states by proposing policy, budget, and tax agendas; mobilizing civic and business leaders; and appointing members of higher education coordinating agencies and governing boards at state-supported institutions (para. 5-9). Merisotis also emphasized specific policies through which governors can increase college completion and higher education productivity in their states, including performance funding systems, student incentives, low-cost delivery models, and business efficiency practices.

While the focus has primarily been on states, there is also evidence that foundations have attempted to shape the federal policy agenda as it relates to higher education. Hebel (2009, May 1) described how Merisotis "has gained the ear of the White House. In a detailed memo to the Obama transition team late last year, Mr. Merisotis expressed his concern about 'dangerous stagnation' in the nation's degree-attainment rates and urged the incoming administration to 'make human-capital development a cornerstone of U.S. economic policy'" (para. 1). The author went on to say that Merisotis "has had several conversations about Lumina's 'big goal,' and policy issues, with members

of the White House economic and domestic-policy councils. Robert M. Shireman, deputy under secretary of education, says Mr. Merisotis was among the experts the Education Department consulted when it sought to determine the right goals for education and the best numbers to use in measuring progress toward them” (Hebel, 2009, May 1, para. 10). Clearly, interacting with policy makers at both the state and federal level is a key element of this grantmaking strategy.

(4) The emergence of ‘advocacy philanthropy’ has resulted in the unabashed use of foundation strategies to influence government action, policy, and legislation—in their own words, foundations are taking on a leadership role, acting as a catalyst for change, identifying  search areas, supporting best practices, engaging in public policy advocacy, enhancing communications power, using convening power, fostering partnerships, building public will, and employing the bully pulpit. This approach has led to more intentional partnerships between foundations governments, as well as more collaboration among foundations themselves. This behavior reflects a deviation from the established norms in higher education philanthropy, norms that generally created a distance between foundation activity and politics.

Several academic scholars (Hammack, 1999; McKersie, 1999; Dowie, 2001; Lagemann and de Forest, 2007) have documented the emergence of strategic and venture philanthropy movements in the mid- and late 20th century; however, there is little evidence to suggest that these tactics were applied to higher education grantmaking prior to around the year 2003. Yet, today these methods are at the heart of both the Lumina and Gates foundations’ approach to addressing the pressing issues in higher education. Merisotis’s (2010, May 18) comments in a recent speech illustrate this new posture that his foundation is taking toward higher education:

I think what we came to realize fairly quickly was that the Lumina Foundation had an opportunity to be a catalyst—to be a leadership organization that could provide national leadership on these issues of access and success in higher education....So as a foundation, we not only make grants to support programs that will improve success in colleges and universities, but we’re also participating actively in advancing public policy that will lead to our goals and we are committed to contributing to the public will....So I think it’s very important to recognize that Lumina sees that unique capacity that it has as having dimensions that take us well beyond the traditional grantmaking role. (para. 4)

It is clear from Merisotis's remarks that some foundation leaders strongly believe that the current situation in higher education necessitates a more strategic approach.

In their report² on trends in educational philanthropy, Grantmakers for Education (2010a) found that 74 percent of survey respondents said they engaged in policy research/analysis, 72 percent in advocacy, 69 percent in coalition building, 62 percent in policymaker education, 48 percent in public will campaigns, and 38 percent in implementation. As stated in the report, “over the past decade, there has been a groundswell of interest in public policy among education grantmakers. With this growing recognition of the importance of public policy, grantmakers see opportunities for the field to continue to expand its role while sharpening its practice. Indeed, some respondents noted that without changing policy, funders cannot ensure that other desired changes will be sustained” (Grantmakers for Education, 2010a, p. 16). This last statement is critical, as it implies that policy advocacy is the way in which many foundations attempt to ensure the sustainability of their initiatives. The document goes on to detail the specific policy engagement strategies of respondents, noting that “74 percent support policy research and analysis, which is perhaps the most traditional policy-related strategy for funders. More surprising was the high percentage of funders—72 percent—supporting advocacy, which has traditionally been considered a higher-risk area for grantmakers” (Grantmakers for Education, 2010a, p. 14).

In many ways, Lumina is a pioneer of this type of policy work in the field of higher education philanthropy. Reporting from the 2010 SHEEO annual meeting, Kelderman (2010, Jul 14) described how the Lumina Foundation “will expand its efforts by convening business leaders, lawmakers, higher-education groups, and faculty members to build consensus on specific policy measures. In addition...Lumina will draft model policies for states, including legislation. The group is already working with the American Legislative Exchange Council, a conservative-leaning

² The report available at the original writing of this paper was from 2010; a more recent report from 2011 shows very similar results.

organization, to write and introduce bills in state houses. Lumina has also hired a director of state policy to coordinate the foundation's efforts" (para. 5-7). At the Gates Foundation, focusing on public policy advocacy became an important part of the organization's revised higher education strategy. Robelen (2008, Nov 18) recounted that, "to bolster its work, the foundation plans to put more money into research and data-gathering, along with advocacy aimed at building public and political will" (para. 4). One Gates Foundation strategy brief details this approach, stating, "We will use our voice and convening power to make the case about the importance of getting students to and through college. Our investments will be focused on mobilizing and inspiring leaders, employers, and communities across the country to embrace the goal and make the policy and financial commitments necessary to achieve it" (Gates Foundation, 2009, p. 7).

There is little evidence to suggest that foundations have so overtly and systematically targeted higher education public policy prior the current era. In a recent *Education Week* article, Robelen (2010, Dec 8) put recent foundation behavior into a more historical context, writing,

Most grantmakers traditionally have eschewed engaging in the policy arena, experts say, whether because they thought it was inappropriate, illegal, or too risky to their reputation. Ms. Tebben, from Grantmakers for Education, recalls the reluctance she perceived from many foundation officials to consider wading into policy matters back in 2002, at a conference her organization hosted. "We had maybe one session out of 30 where funders were talking about policy," she said. "And it was seen as a radical thing... People would say, 'We don't like to use the word policy.' People were very, very anxious about it." Now, she says, the discussion has shifted from whether philanthropies should engage in the policy realm to how to do so effectively, what roles to serve, and how to evaluate their impact. The organization's most recent annual conference, held this fall in New Orleans, featured a variety of sessions that touched on policy and advocacy issues. ('A Radical Thing' para. 1-5)

Tebben's experience suggests that the shift in foundation attitudes toward public policy that occurred between 2002 and 2010 was dramatic.

It is also clear that Gates and Lumina are being joined by other major philanthropies in their funding of broad-scale higher education reform issues. Many of these other foundations have long histories of funding higher education, but some of them are altering their methods in a way that

aligns more closely with the approach of Gates and Lumina. Recently, Merisotis (2010, Jul 14) commented that,

A growing number of our peers in philanthropy—including the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and the Kresge Foundation, just to name a few—are making significant investments in efforts to improve college degree attainment. This is a welcome shift from just a few years ago, when many foundations were directing their resources *away* from higher education. Though Lumina certainly can't take the credit, it's clear that we are right in the middle of a significant trend. And it's a trend that should be very encouraging for everyone here today. Suddenly, it seems that higher education—specifically, the commitment to increase college success—is where the action is. Obviously, that is a very good thing for all of us who care about postsecondary education and see the enormous benefits that it can provide for individual Americans and for our society as a whole. (para. 6-7)

Being 'where the action is' may be an important impetus for foundation collaboration. While most foundations engage in some sort of communication with their colleagues—seeking advice or discussing work in common—many have taken their collaboration to new levels. As stated in the Grantmakers for Education (2010a) report, “a majority of those who engage in collaboration [pool] funds for joint initiatives in a specific issue area (56 percent), or to support a specific grantee (51 percent)...39 percent of those who collaborate make joint funding decisions around a specific issue, and just 20 percent set common guidelines for funding around a particular topic” (pp. 16-17). It also appears that leading foundations and government agencies may be spurring the collaboration; as summarized in the report, “the impetus for collaboration is often external...with an invitation to collaborate from another education funder motivating 67 percent of those who have increased or anticipate increasing their participation in collaborations. Another 56 percent pointed to opportunities emerging from federal education initiatives as prompting collaborations” (Grantmakers for Education, 2010a, p. 17).

Overall, the evidence suggests that modern philanthropic foundations are collaborating more directly and, in doing so, funding issues in ways that allow them to more directly shape how their money is used. It is our assertion that the shift in the relationships between foundations, higher

education institutions, and policy actors may have important implications for American higher education at large.

Interview Themes

Our examination of these working hypotheses produced a number of important themes, many of which were confirmed in our interviews with professionals in higher education policy and philanthropy. These include several potential benefits and concerns, as well as some other consequences that, depending on one's perspective, can be seen as positive or negative.

First, there exist some tangible potential benefits to the 'advocacy philanthropy' approach to higher education. Many persons in higher education policy see the recent actions by foundations in a positive light. At a time when both funding and energy is low in states and institutions, foundations are demonstrating that their initiatives may have the potential to result in meaningful change.

Benefits

(1) Foundations are drawing attention to important problems and creating a sense of urgency.

A recent paper published by Grantmakers for Education (2010b) described how philanthropies can create an effective climate of reform, stating that "grantmakers are uniquely positioned to raise a sense of urgency around education reform issues, asking critical questions and challenging public and private entities to take on issues of vital importance. Funders can bring crucial perspective and pressure to make college completion a priority for postsecondary institutions, policymakers and public higher education systems. Innovative programs and partnerships already exist, and philanthropy can play a critical role in developing promising strategies and scaling proven practices" (p. 4). One higher education policy expert we interviewed echoed this opinion, asserting that the issues presently being addressed in higher education "need a lot of pieces working together, pointing in the same direction. Pieces have begun to be identified: policy at the state and federal level, practices on the ground and the way colleges operate—what colleges do on the ground, how

they interact with their students, needs to be done better, more effectively, perhaps differently. That is an accepted notion at the generic level, but when you dig deeper, that is what really needs to be explored and understood in a sophisticated and strategic way” (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011). This person has observed foundations being catalysts for getting things ‘pointing in the same direction.’

(2) Philanthropies are using grantmaking as a way to bring key actors together.

One theme expressed throughout Hebel’s (2009, May 1) article is that the Lumina Foundation—and specifically Merisotis—has been able to bring major actors from a variety of sectors together in an unprecedented manner; the author explains,

Under Mr. Merisotis’s leadership, Lumina has begun working with groups of faculty members, students, business leaders, and others in three states to help them draft common sets of expectations for what students need to know to earn degrees in certain disciplines....Mr. Merisotis has convened meetings of academics, policy analysts, government officials, and business leaders to discuss key ideas—such as how the United States might borrow ideas from Europe to better align standards and measure student achievement—as a way to bring new voices to the debate and to spur action. (Hebel, 2009, May 1, para. 7-8)

The article goes on to commend the way in which the foundation has collaborated with other organizations, stating that “Mr. Merisotis also has deepened Lumina’s relationships with other philanthropies. He and officials of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Ford Foundation are discussing, for instance, how the groups might collaborate to help the nation meet President Obama’s 2020 goal for higher education” (Hebel, 2009, May 1, Forging Collaboration para. 3).

One policy expert we interviewed described how foundations are often looking to pull together ‘the best and the brightest’ in higher education policy circles. This person outlined an interpretation of the recent developments in which foundations are characterized as a helping partner, stating, “Yes, there has been a shift in foundation support. And it could be seen as the independent variable...the variable that is trying to push the change. But one could also say that it is

the foundations saying, ‘hey, we know something needs to change, and we are here to help you do it. We are not trying to push you. We are basically saying that change is real, it has to happen, so here we are higher education, let us be your partners; we can help you make these changes if you will embrace them’” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 12, 2011).

(3) Foundations are scaling up reforms to the point that they can result in substantive change.

In the Grantmakers for Education (2010a) report that described the increase in the number of philanthropic foundations involving themselves in public policy advocacy, it was stated that “respondents expressed growing enthusiasm for policy work. Many funders voiced a sentiment summed up by one respondent’s observation that the ‘trend to partner with government and to fund public policy’ is an ‘upside’ for grantmakers eager to enact reforms” (Grantmakers for Education, 2010a, p. 14). Welner and Farley (2010) expanded on this notion in a document arguing for the benefits of advocacy philanthropy; the authors contended that “by investing in advocacy, organizing, and civic engagement, grantmakers seeking to improve education can assist in addressing power imbalances and participatory inequities and, ultimately, can help break this cycle. By investing in such advocacy-related activities, philanthropists receive a return on their investment of a magnitude that would be impossible if the spending had only immediate, direct beneficiaries” (p. 2). In other words, with state budgets in their current dismal state, contemporary foundations may be providing the necessary means by which reform leaders can keep policymakers, and the public’s, attention on higher education reform issues.

One foundation official we interviewed indicated that there has been a realization that the problems facing higher education in the United States require solutions within policy and governance structures; this person said that the primary impetus for this approach is that foundation leaders have figured out that, in order to get things to scale, you need to remove policy barriers and create new policy mechanisms (Anonymous, personal communication, June 14, 2011). One policy

expert we spoke to mentioned that a more deliberate approach to higher education grantmaking “means you get much more focused attention... You get at least a shot at doing something on a larger scale than otherwise would happen, and therefore you get a chance of making a bigger difference on some really important issues” (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011). Another expert emphasized how scaling up reforms through policy change is a necessary development if one truly wants to alter the current trajectory of higher education. This person believes that current foundation agendas are “the logical conclusion anybody would come to if they would look at these issues... I certainly think that these things are indeed the way you have to go if you want to get the objective of more students through college—you have to change practice and policy and you have to change it all at the same time in a messy, directed way, and you have to be very intentional about it. And I think anybody objectively looking at the data would come to that conclusion” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 12, 2011). This person also discussed how keeping issues like college completion at the forefront of national policy discussions forces higher education leaders to have “to answer day in and day out, not only to policymakers, but to the public, to their trustees, perhaps even to their own faculty and staff, and that becomes the conversation, that becomes one of those top things that is getting the grease, and one can presume then that change will occur over time” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 12, 2011).

Concerns

In addition to identifying some of the potential benefits, our interviews brought to light several concerns about a more deliberate, policy advocacy-focused approach to philanthropy in higher education:

(1) Foundations lack external accountability and are concentrating power away from practice.

The most frequent criticism of foundations in the academic literature is the lack of accountability and transparency in their hierarchical structures, financial arrangements, operating

policies, and grantmaking decisions (Bacchetti & Ehrlich, 2007). Within higher education circles, these concerns have grown with the emergence of ‘advocacy philanthropy,’ in which foundation officials are directly inserting themselves into the public policy process. One policy expert we interviewed commented that “the most disturbing element [of the current approach to higher education philanthropy] is that, in America, we elect officials to determine the direction of the country, yet foundations are working to set the public policy agenda. Foundation officials are not elected, foundations do not pay taxes, and there are no accountability or transparency measures. It’s not that they shouldn’t have a voice, but trying to direct government is another thing; it could be a big misstep on their part, and there could be a backlash” (Anonymous, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

One foundation officer we spoke with expressed worry about the concentration of power and knowledge within certain social strata. This person referenced psychologist, philosopher, and education scholar John Dewey and his writings about the role of knowledge in social change, pointing in particular to Dewey’s notion that the people who are closest to the problem need to be part of analyzing the problem and coming up with solutions. As this foundation officer put it, “With higher education policy, we are discussing issues of race, class, and marginalization. But the elites are running foundations. This creates some division and raises the question of ‘whose knowledge and experience counts?’” (Anonymous, personal communication, June 22, 2011). In a similar vein, another higher education policy expert we interviewed commented that, while there is no unanimity amongst even a small cadre of foundations and organizations about the best strategies, “what wins are the ideas of the folks with money. And, you know, that is the golden rule” (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011).

These comments correspond with a major criticism that has been expressed by those in state, institutional, and philanthropic sectors—that foundations are interfering with the workings of

government by directly involving themselves in the political process. Reporting from a 2010 ASHE conference panel on philanthropy and higher education, Lederman (2010, Nov 22) wrote that the concerns related to the college completion agenda being put forth by foundations “have less to do with the agenda itself—few strongly dispute the basic premise that more higher education for more people will be good for the country, its economy and its citizens—than with the groups’ uncomfortably close alignment with the Obama administration and their purposeful and forceful intervention into public policy deliberations, which foundations have generally sought to avoid” (para. 3). The article continues with an account of one leader’s—Michael S. McPherson, President of the Spencer Foundation—criticisms:

In a commentary that was polite yet pointed, McPherson expressed reservations about the change in philanthropic approach that Gates and Lumina have so eagerly embraced. “When we look at this movement” that the “outcomes-based” foundations have joined, “it’s not just any old outcome—it involves changes at the national level in...government institutions’ behavior,” he said, referring to public schools and state-supported colleges. Foundations are “not supposed to be involved in politics,” McPherson said, and while he said specifically that he did not think that the charities’ advocacy and efforts to “change federal policy” break the law, “it is in tension with the original spirit of what foundations are designed to do: go off and do their own thing,” he said. “This represents a shift from working at the edges to a concerted effort to change the core, working through political avenues,” McPherson said. “These are people nobody has voted for...They hold everybody else accountable but haven’t been elected themselves.” (Lederman, 2010, Nov 22, Alternative View para. 2)

(2) Philanthropies are stifling innovation by promoting large-scale, prescriptive grants.

Reporting on the Gates Foundation’s work in postsecondary education, Ashburn (2010, Aug 8) recounted, “Few people openly criticize the foundation, but privately some worry that its approach to postsecondary reform is too top-down and too systematic” (para. 6). One foundation officer we spoke with confirmed that there is an increasing level of ‘prescriptiveness’ on the part of philanthropic foundations; in addition to setting the agenda, organization leaders and staff are deciding on the appropriate strategies and leading grantees along the course of action that they want. This person commented that, more often than not, foundation staff rather than outside researchers are taking the commanding role and guiding the direction of projects (Anonymous, personal

communication, June 22, 2011). A higher education policy expert we interviewed contended that Lumina and Gates have defined the current issues in higher education in too narrow of terms and with too narrow of strategies (Anonymous, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

One policy expert we interviewed believes that the Gates and Lumina foundations are working from the notion that they know what is needed and, thus, are focusing on a narrow set of criteria rather than relying on researchers or program administrators to develop and test possible solutions (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011). This person claimed that in the past foundations might have desired the same level of reform, but they approached their grantmaking very differently—“they announced their interests and then opened the doors for institutions and organizations to propose activities consistent with that agenda; and they picked the winners and said ‘nice try’ to the losers. Now they have an agenda but they also have strategies that they are interested in playing out to pursue that agenda. They are identifying organizations to conduct them, in a different process than has historically happened” (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011). The policy expert maintained that, while organizations are still being invited into the conversation about how best to make progress, “it is much more at the foundations’ discretion and their initiative than it used to be...[they say] here are pieces that are going to play out to get there... here are the partners that we are going to pay most attention to in that process. That is different than it used to be” (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011).

A different policy expert highlighted the role that intermediaries are playing in the process. This person declared that intermediaries have been around for a long time and serve several functions, including managing programs, re-granting to other organizations, and receiving assets because a foundation needed to move its money; however, this person noted that “foundations are looking at intermediaries and saying, we have some specific goals and objectives that we want to achieve in this area, and here you go, intermediary, we are going to give you this money and you are

going to manage this effort for us—you are going to get us from A to B—and this is what we want you to do with our resources. So it is very explicit, or at least more explicit than it had been, and I think that might be a change in terms of the role of intermediaries” (Anonymous, personal communication, April 12, 2011).

Several of the persons we spoke with emphasized how a narrow, prescriptive strategy can result in stifling innovation in the field. As one higher education policy officer put it, “When you think you have all the answers, you exclude so many great ideas out there. The standardization and narrowness of their agenda means that ideas have to fit into narrow boxes, at the expense of some other really great ideas” (Anonymous, personal communication, June 23, 2011). A policy expert we interviewed confirmed that “there are an awful lot of ideas that could be out there that never see the light of day now because the competitions of ‘tell us how you would tackle this problem’ and those sort of wide open invitations to send in proposals just are not there. There may be some really good ideas that do not see the light of day anymore, because the ideas in many ways are becoming the purview of the foundation staffs and whoever they bring in or not. So it is being controlled by groupthink more than it used to be” (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011).

(3) Foundation advocacy and insertion into state/government policies has resulted in an outsized influence on the part of philanthropy.

Discussions about the accountability and prescriptiveness of modern foundations have led to concerns about foundations’ potential for disproportionate or unwarranted influence. One foundation official we interviewed said it might be fair to say that foundations—namely, the Gates and Lumina foundations—currently have “outsized” influence (Anonymous, personal communication, June 14, 2011). While the Gates Foundation has received the most vocal criticism in this regard, the Lumina Foundation’s recent activities have also been met with some skepticism. On more than one occasion, Lumina has been referred to as the ‘800-pound gorilla’ of philanthropic

foundations, a reference to the organization's capacity to dictate the debate occurring in higher education policy circles. In particular, Stuart (2010, Aug 18) wrote that " Lumina's financial size (it has grown to more than \$1 billion) as one of the 30 largest foundations in the nation and its aggressive push of its 2025 program have made the Indianapolis-based foundation the buzz of the higher education community. Still, [it is] a smaller being among the cluster of the nation's bigger and much older foundations, and some marvel that this midget among giants is moving like an 800-pound gorilla" (para. 6-7). In another recent article on foundation influence, Robelen (2010, Dec 8) highlighted similar criticisms, stating,

Some observers express deep concerns about the role philanthropy is playing in policy. In a book published this year, education historian Diane Ravitch addresses the issue in a chapter called "The Billionaire Boys' Club," singling out in particular the Gates, Broad, and Walton foundations as collectively wielding what she sees as too much influence....In an interview, Ms. Ravitch said she doesn't oppose philanthropies engaging in policy work, but expressed alarm at what she sees as so much money and influence working in lock step, and to have converged around an agenda she says has largely been embraced by the Obama administration, leaving little room for contrary ideas. "We are seeing the strangulation of the political process by this kind of monopoly of public and private funding," she said. (Too Much Influence? para. 1-3, 5-6)

In the latest Grantmakers for Education report, the organization documented the tensions surrounding foundations and public policy, expressing caution with regard to recent behavior:

Over the years, GFE has encouraged grantmakers to engage with public policy as a high-leverage way to achieve sustainability and scale and we've seen a steady rise in both the number of funders working in policy and the range of ways in which they are doing so. But as philanthropy's policy influence has grown, so too have concerns from inside and outside the sector about the roles it is appropriate for funders to play. At the heart of these concerns is a fear that philanthropy's wealth provides disproportionate access and influence, and when coupled with the perceived lack of accountability of grantmakers, philanthropy's voice may drown out the voice of the broader public.

As a field, we must take these concerns to heart and be very careful about how we exert our influence. We need to engage in the policy process in a way that strengthens the process as well as advancing our specific policy goals. We must be vigilant about including the voices of those most affected by our policy aims. We must listen carefully—especially to our harshest critics, who may be the ones best positioned to highlight the unintended consequences of our strategies. As we advocate and engage in public policy discussions, we must ensure that the voices on the ground can be heard" (Grantmakers for Education 2011, pp. 31-32).

Other Consequences

Several other consequences have emerged from recent trends in higher education philanthropy that, depending on one's perspective, can be seen as positive or negative changes.

(1) There is less money available for field-initiated academic research.

One of the higher education policy experts we spoke with indicated that there is a sense on the part of institutions and their faculty that less foundation money is available for traditional academic research; while there are some research-oriented grants, many contemporary foundations have not defined the issues they are addressing as research problems but, rather, as implementation problems. Foundation leaders are saying that they already know what to do and are trying to influence public policy in that direction. In this person's experience, there appears to be less money available for faculty research overall, and the money that is offered often comes from the federal government, not independent foundations. This expert has mixed feelings about this consequence—on the one hand, it is troubling that foundations and policymakers doubt that the academy can get the research done successfully and efficiently; on the other hand, it is clear to this person that education schools and higher education in general have not stepped up to the challenge of addressing these issues effectively. The expert conceded that research by faculty is very often more expensive and less timely than research done by policy organizations, and that individual faculty interests often drive the research agenda (Anonymous, personal communication, June 23, 2011).

Another higher education policy expert we spoke to commented that foundations do not care about research for research's sake. Rather, they are interested in how knowledge-creation leads to student success. This person believes that, especially given the current climate, colleges and universities now have to respond to a narrative that policymakers are increasingly buying into—the idea that more students need to complete degrees. This shift in the conversation has altered the issues that higher education leaders have to address, and in many ways completion and productivity

are emerging as the top priorities, not academic research (Anonymous, personal communication, April 12, 2011).

(2) There has been a shift from a local focus to a national focus, resulting in potential changes to higher education power structures.

The shift in the foundation approach to higher education reform is also affecting policy and practice at the institutional level. In many states, the broad policy goals that, with the foundations' encouragement, have been laid out by the state are being transferred to the institution level to implement. One notable development that was mentioned in an informal conversation with a policy expert is that, with state budgets being strapped, performance funding and accountability systems are being marketed to state policymakers as a way to cut costs and improve efficiency (Anonymous, personal communication, May 26, 2011). As a result, there is a growing level of frustration on the ground—at the same time as new goals and expectations are being taken on by the governor or legislature, financial and technical resources that are needed to provide support to those institutions and practitioners are being cut.

One foundation officer we spoke to confirmed that frustration on the ground is widespread. This person mentioned that such a reaction is to be expected when institutions are undergoing change but also emphasized that the prescriptiveness on the part of foundations is also a problem. Are foundations making institutions partners? Are faculty and staff being viewed as experts—as engaged players who can help tackle the problem—or are they seen as the problem in terms of perpetuating the status quo? This officer commented that if campus community members are seen as collaborators, their frustration is more manageable because it is related to the problem rather than to the people dictating solutions (Anonymous, personal communication, June 22, 2011).

A senior policy expert we interviewed highlighted how the large foundations' approach to change does not put much value in the power of local actors. This person noted that the

foundations “have an approach that says ‘We are going into states, and we are going to interest them and enact change’...I have been around the business long enough to know that the only time you get real change is when somebody at the local level—be it a state or a system—has a problem that they are trying to address and they want to change.... So it is one thing when the locals call and say ‘help us and talk to us,’ and it is another thing when the foundations say, ‘we will work in a state and make this happen’” (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011).

(3) There has been a withdrawal of trust from higher education institutions.

The movement away from making grants directly to higher education institutions toward funding initiatives with the goal of improving the output of our nation’s diverse postsecondary system may reflect a shift in attitude on the part of foundations—from seeing higher education as an end in itself to higher education institutions being a *means* to an end, as a way to achieve a broader social good (J. Burkhardt, personal communication, Mar 28, 2011). In a recent speech, Merisotis (2009, Mar 17) drew attention to this idea as it relates to efficiency, stating that, “rather than having economists working over here, education policymakers huddling over there, and labor experts operating somewhere in between, we’re suggesting that we unite as partners behind the concept that higher education can and should play a major role in restoring and sustaining economic prosperity and social stability in America. Think of postsecondary education not as an end in itself ... but as a means to an end” (para. 14). Others, however, have framed the ‘means rather than ends’ idea as a way to avoid the self-interest of institutions. Bacchetti and Ehrlich (2007) reported that, “those in colleges and universities, several foundation officials told us, see their campuses as ends in themselves, not means to social ends. It would come as news to most in higher education, one adviser said, that foundations have agendas and look for colleges and universities to help carry out those agendas. To the contrary, he suggested that most campuses want to set their own agendas and then expect foundations to support them” (p. 10). The evidence in this paper suggests that many

contemporary philanthropies have set broad higher education goals and, in turn, have lowered their expectations that individual institutions and their faculty will be able to carry out these objectives.

Conclusions and Discussion

Overall, the qualitative evidence in this section—from both popular news sources and our interviews with foundation and policy experts—suggests that the shift in the relationships between foundations, higher education institutions, and policy actors may have the important implications for the future of American higher education. Some tangible potential benefits exist, namely, the notion that philanthropic foundations have the money and capacity to draw attention and create a sense of urgency around the problems in higher education and scale up promising reforms to the point that they can result in systemic change. The related concerns, however, are that foundations lack accountability; their strategies are too narrow and prescriptive and, thus, stifle innovation; and they have outsized influence. Several other consequences have already been developing, including less money available for academic research; frustration on the ground, specifically at colleges and universities; and the surfacing of a philanthropic philosophy that higher education is a means to social good rather than an end in itself.

Throughout the course of this paper, we have argued that the issues being addressed and the strategies being used by contemporary major foundations reflect an important divergence from the traditional philanthropic approach to funding higher education. Most notably, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation for Education have taken up a set of methods—strategic grantmaking, public policy advocacy, the funding of intermediaries, and collaboration with government—that illustrate their direct and unapologetic desire to influence policy and practice in numerous higher education arenas. Other major foundations, many of whom have a long history of philanthropic activities in higher education, are joining Gates and Lumina in these efforts.

Furthermore, we have drawn attention to the major criticisms surrounding this style of philanthropy,

as well as some of the potential benefits, as our country continues to debate how best to reform our diverse system of higher education.

Above all, our investigation into this topic has made one thing clear: contemporary philanthropic foundations are garnering much attention from the higher education community—their efforts have been cited by numerous higher education media outlets, influential policy organizations, and government agencies at both the state and federal level. Despite this widespread interest in their work, however, a few important questions remain about their long-term impact: (1) Do the past few years signal a wholesale shift in philanthropy? (2) Will current planning and policy roles be altered? (3) Will modern philanthropic foundations create lasting change?

In a recent *New York Times* article titled “Policy-Making Billionaires,” reporter Nicholas Confessore (2011, Nov 27) documented how a number of wealthy individuals (Bill Gates, Howard Shultz, and Mark Zuckerberg were all used as examples) have chosen to focus on public policy initiatives. As stated in the article, ““What’s going on at a broader level is a sense of, “Hey, we can be much more effective and efficient than government in doing things,”” said Leslie Lenkowsky, a professor of philanthropic studies and public affairs at Indiana. ‘And it’s become more pervasive in recent years”’ (Confessore 2011, para. 3). This interpretation of current philanthropic behavior begs the question: By advocating for public policy changes and short-cutting established state funding and governance structures, are foundations replacing, rather than enhancing, the role of states? Confessore’s (2011, Nov 27) continues along these lines, stating, “But the very loftiness of such ambitions raises a significant question: Can even the very wealthiest philanthropists finance public services on the scale necessary to achieve social change—that is, on the scale of government itself? One way to make that happen: Instead of seeking to supplant what government does, philanthropists can finance advocacy to change it. When philanthropic dollars are applied to lobbying for programs, they can have an enormous leveraging effect on public dollars” (para. 6-7).

But, by inserting themselves into higher education policy and advocacy conversations, is it also possible that foundations are giving states an excuse to “slack off” in their role as primary providers of higher education? Might states see these developments as an opportunity to give up some of their responsibility for higher education to private entities like philanthropies, or perhaps to the federal government, whose stance is aligned with the foundations? If so, what will happen when foundations get tired of these issues (as has happened historically) or when their money runs out?

One of the higher education policy experts we interviewed does not believe that there is a threat to absolving states of their responsibility for providing higher education, because foundation money is just a drop in the bucket compared to state resources; this person did concede, however, that the larger grants are getting the attention of smaller state agencies and institutions that are strapped for money (Anonymous, personal communication, May 19, 2011). That said, when asked if the current model of foundation philanthropy is sustainable, another higher education policy expert we interviewed replied:

I think that answer is no. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is going to spend 475 million dollars up through 2013, that's a half a billion dollars, just on their postsecondary success strategy. That money is going to go away sooner or later, and the questions is: Have institutions replaced that soft money with hard money to do the things they were doing with the soft money? That's the question, and that is an unknown question. We don't know the answer. But the bottom line is, I don't think higher ed is getting any more money, from anybody. So if the investments that the foundations make over the next decade or through 2025... if that money isn't used to transform the way everyday practice occurs at the college so that the regular resources fill in and fund that—in other words, it's 'stop doing what you're doing and do this other thing' and that becomes the norm—if that's not what happens at the end of this investment cycle, then no, it's absolutely not sustainable. (Anonymous, personal communication, April 12, 2011)

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